

The RISD Museum

Exhibition Notes, Number 11, Summer 2000



ABOVE: The installation of *on this ground* at the Smith Hill Public Library (photo by Erik Gould).
RIGHT: Detail from *on this ground*, May 2000 (photo by Erik Gould).



on this ground an installation by **Rebecca Belmore** June 30 through October 8, 2000

On getting acquainted with a community and making art in strange places: An Interview.

Between March and June 2000, Rebecca Belmore was the Art ConText artist-in-residence at the Providence Public Library's Smith Hill Branch. She participated in the transformation of an empty lot behind the library; worked with a group of immigrants in a library literacy program; and engaged students at the nearby Camden Avenue Elementary School; all while creating the artwork that now dominates the Museum's Farago Entry Gallery. Following are her thoughts on questions posed by David Henry, Head of Education, The RISD Museum.

Before you arrived, you had planned to work with a particular group of families and to create a number of different "billboards" throughout the neighborhood, rather than the single large one now on view in the Museum. I wonder if you would talk about the evolution of this project.



The installation of *on this ground* at the Smith Hill Public Library (photo by Erik Gould).



Who is Rebecca Belmore and how old is she?, performance at the Smith Hill Public Library by Rebecca Belmore, March 2000 (photo by Stephen Oliver).

It is important to remember that my proposal for this Art ConText project was based on a one-day visit to Providence a year ago. The Smith Hill Branch was the final stop on my whirlwind tour of the Providence Public Library system on that day. I remember a pile of bread loaves on the front counter and a sign inviting you to take one home. It struck me that this place was more than a library, thus my decision to work in Smith Hill was largely based on intuition. Getting to know a community takes time. Pursuing the stories of individual families takes even longer. I felt that I simply did not have enough time to follow through with my original idea in a way that would be sensitive to the individuals involved. I began looking at the situation in which I found myself. I was living at AS220, an alternative arts center located in Providence's downtown core, and traveling between the library branch and the Museum, a daily experience that made me aware of the "distance" between the sites on a psychological and sociological level. I felt that I should shift the work into another direction.

Describe this "distance."

The "distance" that I'm talking about is the one between the community and the Museum. We all are on some level aware of the diverse realities that exist within our urban landscapes and have our own ideas as to who lives where and how. I see my role in this project as a navigator, not as a bridge-builder between communities. At best, I can offer observations based on my experience.

Do you feel that art and artists, in making us aware of our differences, can lead us to narrow them?

The Museum should be aware that the Art ConText program is a beginning in what has to be a long, sustained effort.

How did you go about introducing yourself to the community?

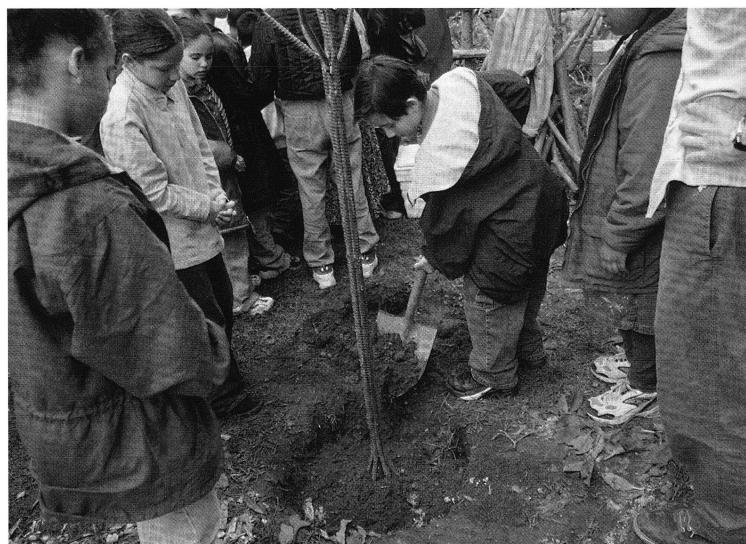
I threw myself a party. My birthday had arrived, and I was in need of a haircut, so I decided that I would celebrate with the patrons of the Smith Hill Public Library. The party, complete with a giant cake, a hairdresser, and an accordionist, became a participatory performance piece. My audience, a mixture of young people and adults, was directed to ask me questions that would tell them about myself. The experience of seeing me being groomed in their library prompted some very funny and personal questions. I think it was an oddly successful way of letting them know what I do.

Please talk about the work you did and the people you met in Smith Hill.

I was interested in two of the library's existing programs: the Kid's Environmental Club and the Adult Literacy Program. Adrienne Shelton, an Americorps VISTA worker placed at the Library [Corporation for National

RIGHT: Planting a "Community Art Tree" by Ryan Walquist behind the Smith Hill Public Library (photo by Erik Gould).

BELLOW: Planting the garden behind the Smith Hill Public Library (photo by Erik Gould).



Service: Volunteers in Service to America] was developing a garden in an empty lot behind the library, where I had decided to locate my project. Together with Stephen Oliver and the RISD students working with me, we completely transformed the space by creating a garden and installing the panels on the adjacent wall. I was also interested in working with the students from the Family Writing Center, an ESL [English as a Second Language] program of the Providence Public Library. Sherry Fiaux, the course leader, allowed me to participate and helped to integrate my project into her classes.

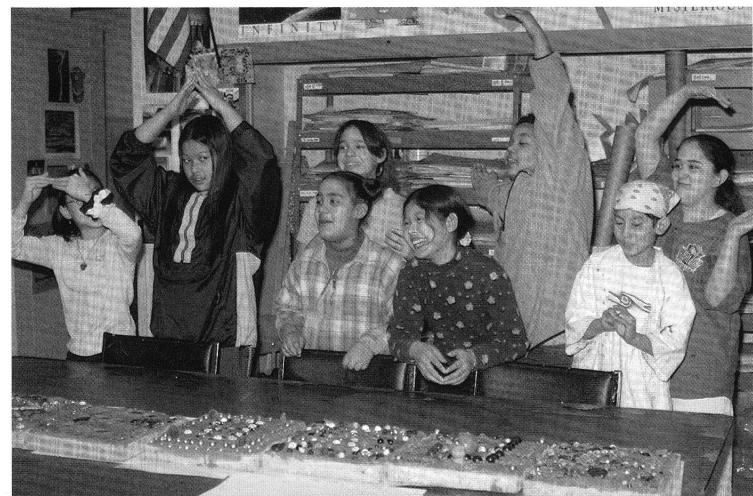
Is this where the imagery of your work comes from?

In part. I photographed the hands of the ESL students and other library patrons. These photographs are the only visual record of a much more complex relationship, one that started with my presence in their class, then was followed by a brief introduction to contemporary art and a RISD Museum visit. In discussing art with these students during their class and during their Museum visit, I became intrigued by the ways that an art context demands a different kind of attention to an object. In *on this ground*, a store-bought Buddha equals the Museum's *Dainichi Nyorai Buddha*. I am intentionally highlighting the relative value of objects in different situations.

*How has this residency been different from others in which you have participated?
Has collaboration always been an interest in your work?*

My few earlier works that could be said to involve a community were made within my own cultural territory. These works were generally a direct response to social and political issues facing First Nations [Native American] communities in Canada. With this residency, I had to come to terms with trying to work with people whose experience has been vastly different from my own.

Students from Camden Avenue Elementary School preparing "Garden Stones" for the outdoor project (photo by Stephen Oliver).



Rebecca Belmore, Canadian, 1960-,
*Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan:
Speaking to Their Mother*, 1991
(photo by Michael Beynon).



Rebecca Belmore at the Smith Hill Public Library
(photo by Stephen Oliver).

Please talk a little about your choice of RISD Museum artworks in this project.

Being here in Providence has made me think about the long history of immigrants to this land. I included the painting of Roger Williams because it caused me to think about my place within the complexity of our combined histories. This and the other works of art in the installation highlight some of the many different cultures and peoples who have struggled to find their place on this land.

What role did the RISD students play?

The RISD students were my assistants. I do not consider myself to be a teacher, but I hope that their time with me gave them a chance to observe the challenges that an artist faces when working with a community. There are different degrees of collaboration, and in my experience flexibility can be an important survival reflex for an artist wishing to work in this manner. The students who helped me were great, and I enjoyed spending time with them.

What are some of the impressions you hope to leave behind?

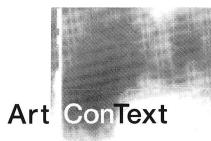
I don't know. I really can't answer that question.

Rebecca Belmore was born in the Sioux Lookout District of Northwest Ontario and now resides in Toronto. While in art school, Ms. Belmore began to work with installation as a medium of expression. It was also there that she first explored performance art and developed one of her most popular personas, High Tech Teepee Trauma Mama. She has participated in residencies with SITE Santa Fe, InSite in San Diego, and the Banff Center for the Arts, among others.

Rebecca Belmore was assisted by RISD students Hannelore Freer (MArch '01), Simone Lichty (BFA Painting '02), Apisak Sindhupak (MAE '01), and Rosanna Flouty (MAE '01).

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Rhode Island School of Design
Providence, Rhode Island

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on this ground is the sixth Art ConText project. Art ConText, a partnership between the Providence Public Library and The RISD Museum, is designed to introduce new audiences to contemporary art; to bring art and reading programs to library branches throughout Providence; and to provide opportunities for RISD students to apply their talents. Funding for Art ConText is provided by Pew Charitable Trusts, the Institute for Museum and Library Services, and the National Endowment for the Arts. For more information about Art ConText, visit the website at www.risd.edu/artcontext.